



Galleria Borghese, Rome

Most scholars believe that Raphael painted "Portrait of a Lady With a Unicorn," but that attribution is fairly recent.

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

She's hard to pin down

Portrait now at Legion of Honor has kept scholars guessing for centuries

One of the most visually stunning objects to reside in the city right now may also be the most intellectually vexing.

The exhibition "Sublime Beauty," which opened to the public Saturday, Jan. 9, at the Legion of Honor, comprises a single painting, grandly presented in its own ample room. Seen through a doorway at the end of a procession of museum galleries, barely more than 2 feet in height, "Portrait of a Lady With a Unicorn" (ca. 1505-06) commands attention from 100 yards off. It glows as if lighted from within: a golden-haired pyramid of sensuality, anchored on pillowed sleeves of ruby, cast in a clear, nearly shadowless

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light and set against a glowing horizon of blue.

If you had the good fortune to see the work without the crowds that will inevitably attend, you might study the picture for a half hour or more: its crystalline, almost mineral quality of detail and color; its startling sense of shared space with the sitter, close on a small porch, together at the edge of a vast and almost featureless terrain.

She is lovely, certainly, but the perfection of her skin and the classic balance of her features heighten the soundless, surreal moment: It is the tiny animal in her arms that has seen more, and that knowledge shows in its expressive face. The unnatural slope of her shoulders, a fiction often maintained by Renaissance artists, softens her steely posture, just as the unicorn's feline paws — not hooves — confirm that it is capable of being tamed.

The narrative mysteries of the picture's content and the technical attractions of its execution are enough to recommend it as an experience not to be missed. But the puzzles it has presented to art history for more than 500 years are more than worth noting.

Remarkably, the work was heavily over-painted in the 17th century, turning it into a depiction of St. Catherine of Alexandria, complete with a cloak covering her shoulders and sleeves, a palm frond and — replacing the unicorn — the broken torture wheel with which Catherine is traditionally associated. In the 1930s these painted additions were removed, creating new debate about the quality of the restoration;

Sublime Beauty: Raphael's "Portrait of a Lady With a Unicorn": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday, Saturday, Jan. 9-April 10. Legion of Honor, 100 34th Ave., S.F. (415) 750-3600. www.legionofhonor.famsf.org.

then X-rays revealed that before the unicorn, a dog symbolizing fidelity was shown in her arms.

Even authorship of the work has been debated for centuries. Experts now seem to agree widely that the painting is by Raffaello Sanzio, the artist we know as Raphael. Strangely, though, that attribution is relatively recent. Other famous artists, including Pietro Perugino, Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, Francesco Granacci, Andrea del Sarto, and "the Florentine School," have been credited. It was not until 1927 that serious argument was made for Raphael.

A good deal of art history has always been speculative — educated guessing is the stock-in-trade of the profession — and few in the field would blush at what is now thought to be a 400-year mistake. Indeed, the exhibition catalog includes two essays that each confidently surmise that a different woman was the painting's subject. You can call her Laura Orsini della Rovere (who was, or was not, the illegitimate child of Pope Alexander VI), or Madelena Strozzi.

In either case, though, you will certainly want to make her acquaintance. The exhibition continues through April 10.

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